

Strategic pairing of colleagues is an effective job-training method

Maureen Soyars

Public schools spend an average of \$18 billion a year on professional development for teachers, but researchers have found little evidence to suggest that any one formal training format consistently improves teacher performance. If formal training isn't reliably achieving results, what can school districts do to help teachers develop and improve skills?

A team of economists set out to discover if teachers can better develop their skills through informal on-the-job training. In [Learning job skills from colleagues at work: evidence from a field experiment using teacher performance data](#) (National Bureau of Economic Research working paper no. 21986, February 2016), John P. Papay, Eric S. Taylor, John H. Tyler, and Mary Laski study teachers who were strategically paired and were then asked to informally work on improving teaching skills.

The researchers tracked teachers in 14 Tennessee elementary and middle schools (7 control schools and 7 treatment schools) during the 2013–14 and 2014–15 school years. Teachers were paired on the basis of a skills assessment that measured 19 skill areas. A teacher with a particularly low score in one or more areas was teamed up with a teacher who had high scores in those same areas. School principals encouraged the pairs “to examine each other’s evaluation results, observe each other teaching in the classroom, discuss strategies for improvement” and then follow up “with each other’s commitments throughout the school year,” but otherwise no formal training was required.

After a year, the researchers found that students in target classrooms scored .12 standard deviations higher than students taught by teachers in a control school. For students, this improvement is like being assigned to a median teacher instead of a bottom-quartile teacher. Gains in teacher performance continued, and likely grew, in the following school year, when students in target classrooms scored 0.25 standard deviation higher on tests—perhaps double the improvement of the first year.

Do the skill improvements come solely from peer learning or are they also attributable to changes in teachers’ motivation or to the sharing of resources? The data suggest that the new job skills were acquired from the peer learning of the colleagues. Improvement, as measured by students’ test scores and by classroom observations, were concentrated in areas where there was a match between a teacher’s weak skills and the partner’s strong skills.

The economists suggest their research could prove meaningful to many professional occupations. Further study is needed on the topic, but informal on-the-job training might be a practical alternative to formal training, thereby saving money and delivering better results.